DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 029 079 UD 008 712

By-Ackerman, Nathan W.

Prejudice, Mental Health and Family Life.

American Jewish Committee, New York, N.Y.

Pub Date Sep 61

Note-30p.

Available from-American Jewish Committee, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street, New York, N.Y. 10022 ($.50).

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$1.60

Descriptors-Behavior Development, Community Attitudes, Discriminatory Attitudes (Social), Family Environment, *Family Life, Family Relationship, Hostility, *Mental Health, Negative Attitudes, Parent Attitudes, *Social Discrimination

This pamphlet explores the relationship among prejudice, mental health, and family life. Prejudice is learned behavior, initially within the family unit which sets the framework for good or bad mental health as well as for the development of positive or negative attitudes. The family also determines the degree and kind of mental health of each member. The document describes the characteristics of the contemporary family, the interfamily stresses, and the ways in which destructive feelings are handled by various types of families within various kinds of social settings. (NH)

ED029079

08712E

JUDICE AND MENTAL HEALTH

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Materials and Research Branch
Equal Educational Opportunities Program
Office of Education

Nathan W. Ackerman, M.D.

UD 008 712

PREJUDICE, MENTAL HEALTH AND FAMILY LIFE

Nathan W. Ackerman, M.D.

UD 008 712

UD 008 712

r. Nathan W. Ackerman is clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, clinical director and research psychiatrist at the Family Mental Health Clinic of the Jewish Family Service, and lecturer at the New York School of Social Work.

In 1959 the Association for the Improvement of Mental Health presented Dr. Ackerman with its Adolph Meyer Award, in recognition of his creative work with mental-health problems of family life.

Besides frequent contributions to professional journals, Dr. Ackerman's works include *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder* (with Dr. Marie Jahoda), one of the pioneering "Studies in Prejudice," published by Harper & Brothers in 1950, and *The Psychodynamics of Family Life,* a therapeutic approach to family problems, published by Basic Books in 1958. He is chief editor of *Exploring the Base of Family Therapy,* issued by the Family Service Association of America in 1961.

FOREWORD

Many pathways of study and action beckon an organization devoted to uprooting intergroup prejudice. Until recent years one of the least traveled was the trail of scientific research.

The great promise held out by this approach became evident after the publication of *Studies in Prejudice,* a five-year research project launched by the American Jewish Committee in 1944 and conducted by a group of eminent psychologists, sociologists, psychiatrists and other social scientists, including Dr. Nathan W. Ackerman. Their findings paved the way for new lines of investigation and social action. Today the work of improving human relations is increasingly responsive to the insights of those who are exploring the inner life of man and the nature of prejudice.

Throughout the years, the American Jewish Committee has continued to encourage such ground-breaking endeavors and to interpret for the general public the knowledge thus brought to light. It is in this tradition that we now present *Prejudice, Mental Health and Family Life.*

JOHN SLAWSON
Executive Vice-President
The American Jewish Committee

AMONG THE many problems facing the civilized world today, there are two that hold a place of special importance – prejudice and mental health. Both have to do with human relations.

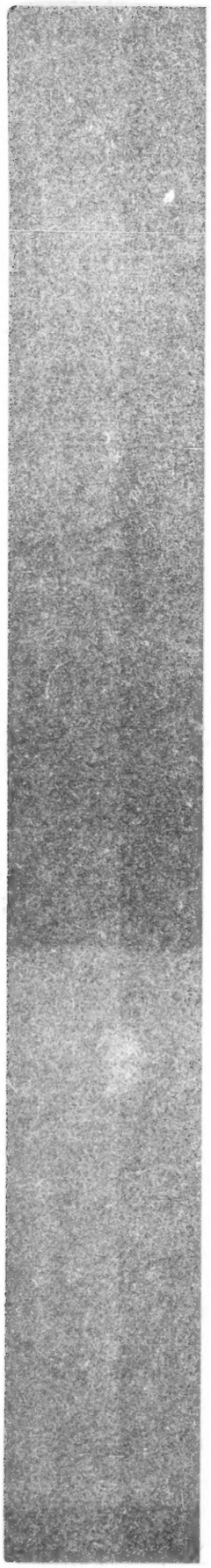
Prejudice involves the kind of people one is against, the people one strongly dislikes. It erupts in many ways that are harmful to society – in conflicts among religious, racial and ethnic groups, in clashes of nations and groups of nations. With the need for mutual understanding, acceptance and cooperation among different peoples greater than ever before, the persistence of prejudice is a rising menace.

Mental health has to do with the kind of person one is, and the way one behaves with other people because one is that kind of person. Breakdowns in mental health seem to be multiplying almost day by day, and the patients' symptoms seem to be growing more severe. The magnitude of this threat is great; indeed, it is one of the most urgent health problems our country faces today.

While prejudice and mental illness make themselves evident in different ways, both impair our ability to perform a basic task in life – getting along with other people.

The first place in life where we learn to get along with others is, of course, in our own family. It is precisely the striving for "belongingness" in the family that influences our proneness to prejudice and mental illness. In other words, both of these ailments have a common origin in the intimate experiences of family life.

We shall now see why this is so.



Our Three Terms... Let us agree at the outset on the meaning of three main terms: prejudice, mental health and family.

Prejudice is a special way of feeling. It signifies a hostile emotion toward people who are different from our own kind, simply because they are different.

The irrational core of prejudice is not always easy to demonstrate. As a rule, it is camouflaged; it is made to appear reasonable, as if the bearer had suffered actual injury at the hands of an entire group. In the reality of day-by-day human experience, rational and justified prejudice rarely exists; yet his grievance looks real to the prejudiced person. He believes it, but he is deceiving himself. He nourishes and fortifies his pet prejudice because it serves his emotional needs in a specific irrational way. We will come to that later.

Mental health is balanced and creative personal functioning, permitting an optimal fulfillment of the individual's potential for group living. It embraces such attributes as maturity, stability, realism, flexibility, altruism, a sense of social responsibility, effective integration in work and human relations, confidence and courage in facing new experience, a concern for the common good. It implies the desire and capacity to grow and learn, to love, and to share with others the adventure of life.

Mental health is not a static condition; it is a process. Nor is it self-sustaining. It is maintained only by continuous effort and requires the emotional support of other persons.

The family is the basic unit of social life, the core of growth and of health. It is a design for

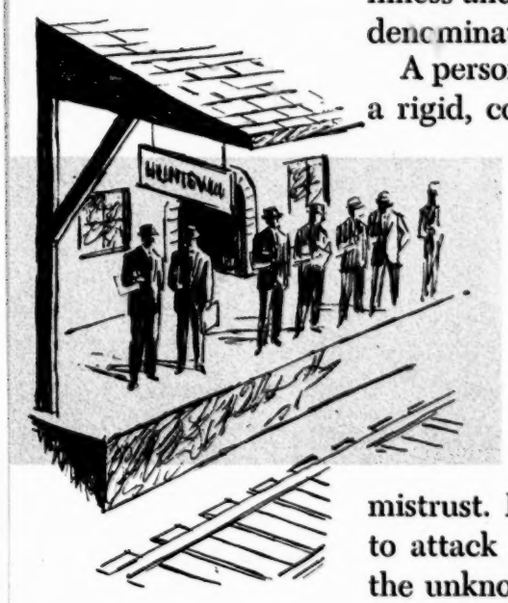
living that creates new life out of the differences of male and female. It has a life cycle of its own – birth, growth to maturity and gradual decline. The family of each generation is born, lives and ultimately dies, but achieves a kind of immortality in the families of its offspring.

The family serves two purposes: First, it provides food, shelter and protection against external danger; it assures survival. Second, it molds the essential human quality of man. Where family life fails, the human quality of its members also fails.

The family socializes its members. Through a joining of their emotional and social identity, it fosters a bond of love and loyalty. Within the home, each member evolves a personal identity that is linked to the identity of the family group. Within this matrix of shared experience the individualities of the members emerge. It is this climate of intimate exchange that cultivates the urge for learning and creative expression.

The Prejudiced Person Health is much more than the absence of illness. A person may not be sick in the sense of requiring medical care, yet fail to achieve the balanced relations of mind, body and social experience that spell good health.

Emotion is a contagious force. In the intimate give-and-take of family life, emotion may drive a person toward breakdown and illness, or it may act to protect his health. Emotional



illness and prejudice have significant common denominators.

A person who is emotionally sick behaves in a rigid, constricted, repetitive way. He loses resiliency, the capacity to accommodate to change. He ceases gradually to learn from experience, to test reality and to grow. He locks himself in an entirely closed system.

A prejudiced person shows similar qualities. Studies reveal that he is ridden with fear and mistrust. He feels weak, exposed, vulnerable to attack and injury. He fears change, fears the unknown and loses the capacity to learn. Because he has no firm sense of belonging, he erects a false facade of sociability. He makes a show of conformity and demands the same stereotyped behavior from everyone else. He sees the person who is different as representing his own concealed weakness. To buttress his inner self, he makes the different person the object of attack, *the scapegoat.*

Usually, the prejudiced person nurses a variety of antipathies. Depending on the social setting in which he finds himself, he may readily substitute one kind of prejudice for another if it will help him evade anxiety, buttress his self-esteem and gain a sense of power. But often, prejudice aggravates the emotional affliction it is meant to relieve.

The harm inflicted on the victim of prejudice is obvious. Not so evident but no less malignant is the insidious emotional warp suffered by the bearer. Clinical observation sug-

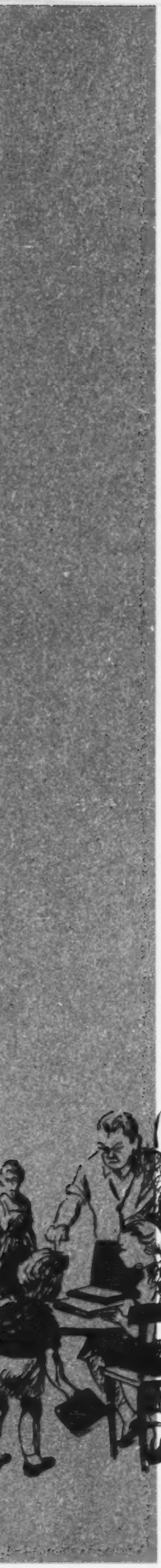
gests that harboring prejudice damages self-respect, induces rigidity, lessens the capacity to tolerate anxiety, weakens the sense of reality and reduces the ability to find new and constructive solutions to pressing problems in human relations.

People tending toward mental illness are prone to lean on prejudice. To stave off their own breakdown, they break down another person. A wife experiencing turmoil, and trying to curb her own dread of mental breakdown, may turn against her own husband. There is real substance to such thoughts as "My wife is driving me crazy" or "She'll be the death of me yet."

Two Kinds of "Bad" Behavior People who achieve sound, robust health have their full share of likes, dislikes, attractions and repulsions. They idealize some human qualities while rejecting others. These are inevitable value preferences.

In communities where rigid barriers of race or creed still persist, some people may reject members of a different group as a token of conformity or a means of affirming their own social status. For example, a white child reared in the Deep South may exhibit a strong prejudice against Negroes simply because he has absorbed the social attitudes of his parents and the immediate community – not because of inherent sickness in his personality.

In other words, behavior that is "bad" – by which we mean destructive to human relations – is sometimes learned. If so, it can also be unlearned. It can be modified or changed by education and experience.



It is important to draw this distinction between "bad" behavior caused by upbringing, and behavior that is deeply rooted in a sick or maladjusted personality. A child may act out the prejudices normal to his environment; but if he is inwardly healthy, he need not continue to cling to them out of an inner urge, a compulsive necessity to maintain himself by injuring another person or group.

It is the urge toward exploitation and degradation of another human being that makes prejudice a destructive force in society. It fortifies a master-slave structure of human relations, in which one person or group exists only to aggrandize another – in which power is exalted for its own sake.

Today's Troubled Family Since the family is the wellspring of tendencies to prejudice and mental breakdown alike, we should take a look at its emotional health today.

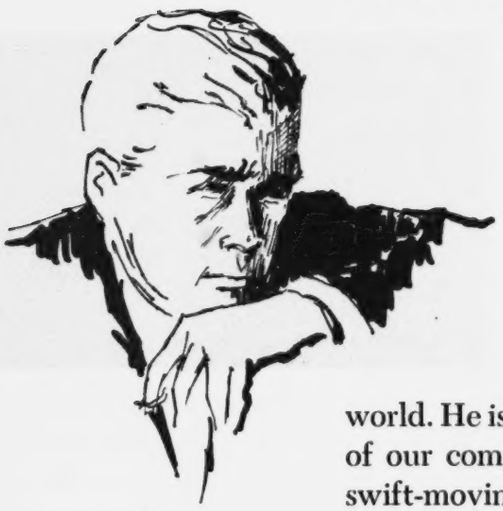
Ideally speaking, sharing and cooperation, and mutual satisfaction of personal needs are governing principles in the home. But the ideal is often far removed from the actuality. It comes down to one question: How are differences of individuals treated in the family – differences in age, sex, appearance, temperament, habits, aptitudes and capacities?

Attitudes toward these individual qualities in the intimacy of family life can make or break mental health. The same attitudes also provide the setting in which prejudices – benign or destructive – are formed.

But families, like individuals, are not all sick or all well. They function healthily in

some ways and fail in others. And so we find elements of illness and health, rigidity and flexibility, prejudice and acceptance, within the same home.

By and large, however, the present-day family is poorly equipped to safeguard the mental health of its members and control the forces which predispose to irrational, socially destructive forms of prejudice. To be sure, families of past generations had their full share of internal difficulty, but the consequences, both personal and social, were more circumscribed.



Today, as never before, the individual feels bewildered and alone amid a baffling and hostile world. He is beset by the tensions and anxieties of our competitive technological society, our swift-moving nuclear age. One effect of this disorientation is that each person turns back to his family for restoration of security and belongingness, for reassurance of his own dignity and worth.

Yet the very stresses of modern life that impel the individual to seek haven are preventing the family from meeting this need. The revolution in technology; the spread of urbanization; the increasing mobility of the population, socially as well as geographically – these trends are dislodging the family from its traditional moorings.

The small family moves its home frequently. Separated from the larger representations of family, it loses the problem-solving resources of the older generations. Grandparents and

other relatives are no longer close. Outside institutions, such as church, school and club, provide no firm buttressing, especially in the impersonal community where the family lacks long-grown roots. The search for anchorage is perhaps best exemplified by the mounting enrollment in church and synagogue, today at an all-time high. Yet there is evidence that this forging of bonds with religious groups is often impelled by insecurity or loneliness, rather than religious conviction.

Internal Warfare Thus, instead of providing a haven of affection and security, the nuclear-age family has trouble holding itself together. Often it splits into warring factions, father siding with son against mother and daughter, or children ganging up against parents, or one parent teaming up with the children against the other parent. In the course of this warfare, one member – child, adolescent or adult – may be made the emotional victim, the scapegoat. The injuries he suffers may make him vulnerable to breakdown. But sometimes, another member comes to his rescue, neutralizing the destructive effects of scapegoating and assuming, in effect, the role of healer.

Whatever the configuration of the family split, it brings distress, distortion of inner relations and disablement of family functions. The members no longer meet one another's emotional needs, support one another's self-esteem or ease one another's anxiety.

In a word, many contemporary families are deficient in their resources for solving problems and conflicts, making decisions, fostering growth and creative development. They are often inadequate to the task of protecting the stability and health of their members, whether children, adolescents or adults, and at the same time provide a fertile matrix for the formation of destructive types of prejudice.

Preferences or Prejudices? In a basic sense the members of one family are, or ought to be, the same kind of people. They have much in common – they are related by blood; they look alike; with rare exception they are of the same color, the same religion, and share the same way of life. In view of this sameness, one might expect prejudice to be reserved exclusively for the outsiders, while love and loyalty prevail within the home. But it is not so simple.

Prejudice emerges within the family too, although in forms quite unlike the usual antagonisms based on color or religion seen in the larger community. We must therefore distinguish between private and public forms of prejudice. Private family prejudice is so subtle, so very different in its guises that it is often not recognized as prejudice at all. Yet it is there just the same – real, abundant, intense and far-reaching in its effects.

Within the family, one encounters a range of strongly held positions – for males against females, for youth against adults, for money and power against spiritual values, for self-control and duty against spontaneity and pleasure, for brain against brawn. Other family

fetishes concern the qualities of smart or stupid, tall or short, fat or skinny; still others revolve about food, cleanliness and clothing.

Yet, are these actual prejudices? Aren't they simply likes and dislikes that naturally vary from person to person, from family to family?

Of course it is true that everyone has pronounced tastes. We are attracted by some qualities, repulsed by others. We all have our pet loves and hates, our ideals and passionate antipathies. Generally speaking, such preferences and aversions are on the side of emotional health as long as they preserve a certain quality of openness and flexibility. They may be distinguished from prejudice insofar as they are subject to testing and change on the basis of experience and new learning. But these same preferences and aversions may turn into prejudice if they become fixed and walled off from any modifying influence in the world of real experience.

Different Types of Families In our heterogeneous culture, families differ greatly one from the next. But there are, nevertheless, some characteristic and identifiable types.

One is marked by uniformity. All members of the family share and express the same unbending attitudes, the same adherence to the status quo. Habits of eating, dressing and socializing are formal and rigidly controlled. Youth defers to age, women to men. The climate is undemonstrative. Outside the home, such people usually express sharp prejudice concerning class differences. They shun disadvantaged minorities.

Another type of uniform pattern may be seen where parental authority is strict and physical punishment the rule. The children obey out of fear, but outside the home they are belligerent and scrappy. They may gang up against minority-group children in the neighborhood.

Moving a step further, there is the type of family in which one member departs from the pattern followed by the rest. The rebellious one may be a black sheep headed for delinquency, or simply an objector to conformity.

Where mother and father are unhappy with each other, the pattern may consist of two competing strands, each child aligning himself with the preferences and antipathies of one parent or the other.

Occasionally one finds almost as many competing strands as family members. But this is rare; it occurs only if there has been a profound emotional split, and each person, whether parent or child, tends to go his own way.

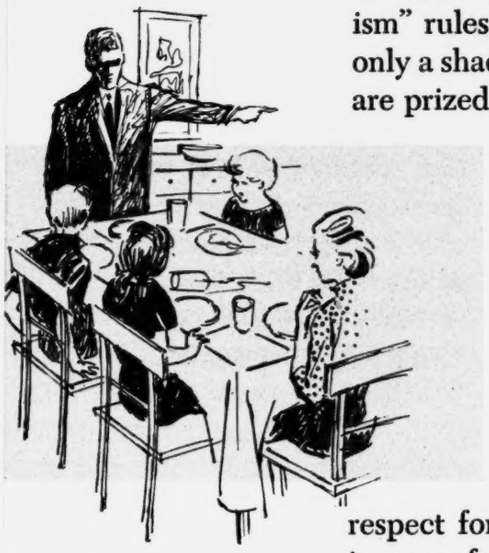
The problem is not to eliminate family prejudice. No child grows up without it in some degree. The question is how to control its depth, intensity, malignancy and social consequences.

How the Twig Is Bent In observing the development of children, we see likes and dislikes picked up and perpetuated, sometimes for a lifetime – likes and dislikes about food, dress, colors, smells, people, animals. The extent to which such attitudes are transformed

into prejudices largely depends on how parents feel in such matters. How do they feel about food preparation, housekeeping, furnishings, division of labor in the home? Do they favor or reject certain people? How do they feel about grandparents and other relatives? About the maid, the babysitter? About dogs, horses and other animals?

Are these attitudes rigid or flexible? Do mother and father share the same reactions? Do they differ? Depending upon the emotional climate of the family, children may absorb and make part of themselves one or another set of likes and dislikes – one or another form of prejudice.

Intense feelings often relate to masculine and feminine ways: "Father's word is the law" or "mother always knows best." Where "momism" rules, the father is downgraded; he has only a shadowy status. The qualities of one sex are prized, those of the other disparaged.



Great weight often is attached to age grouping: the parents are all-important; children should be seen but not heard. Or at the other extreme, the children come first – in which case, anarchy is sometimes the result.

Prejudicial attitudes are polarized around the issue of discipline. Freedom of expression and respect for individual differences are upheld in some families. In others, permissiveness is felt as a threat; control and punishment are of the first importance. Some families value a show of warmth; others suppress it as a sign

of weakness. Some elevate play and pleasure to a top priority; others consider self-indulgence wicked; only duty counts.

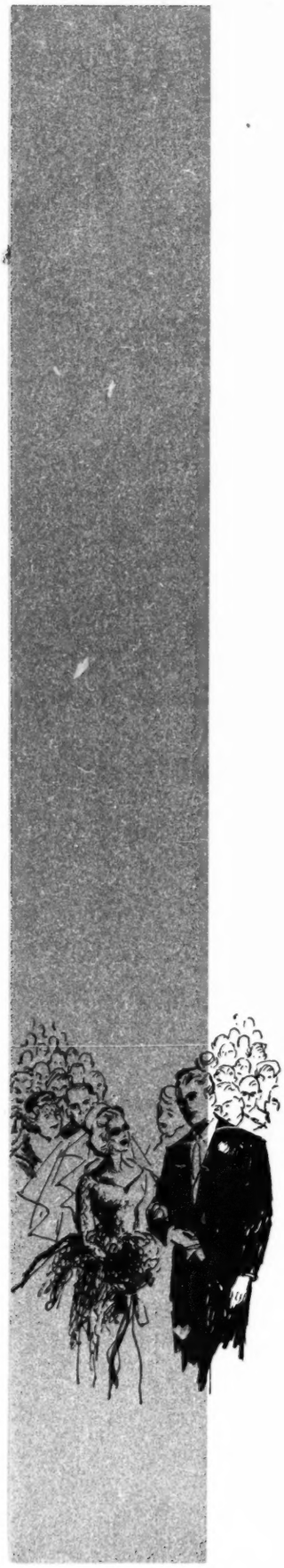
Considering these many varieties of family prejudice, one may ask: So what? As long as they are confined to the inner life, what harm do they do? If one respects the privacy of the family, should not those things be left alone? If these prejudices are lodged in the home and do not invade the public domain, are they our concern?

The answer is that those private forms of prejudice which take shape in childhood *do* enter the public domain. They provide the reservoir of emotional energy, the impelling force for the later prejudices expressed in the wider community against minority groups.

In other words, the familial forms of prejudice become translated ultimately into the racial, religious and ethnic prejudices of the community. Families with intense, violent inner antagonisms may breed the fanatic fringe of bigots who incite organized violence against minority groups.

It is the surrounding culture that makes available and sanctions the common forms of ethnic, religious and racial prejudice. But it is the private emotional need, the anxiety and sense of exposure to threatening differences engendered in the intimacies of family living, that impel certain individuals to make use of these culturally provided forms for their own inner purposes.

Thus the control of destructive feelings and impulses within the family can enhance the well-being of our society.



Toward the Healthy Family The newer knowledge concerning the roots of prejudice in family living raises many problems. It is neither possible nor desirable to standardize likes and dislikes. Difference is the spice of life. Difference brings a conflict of values. This very conflict, the struggle to reconcile different values, is the source of all that is good in human relations as well as bad. It brings tension and distress to be sure, but it is also the wellspring of growth and creative fulfillment in life.

The question cannot be how to eliminate likes and dislikes, or even prejudices, but rather what can be done with the emotional life of the family to maintain health. How can we preserve resiliency, promote receptivity to new social learning and growth, while reducing destructive prejudices to the minimum?

To find the answers, we must examine the main processes of family life. Actually, they begin with the initial courtship between man and woman, which points the way to marriage and children.

Husband and wife each bring to marriage an identity, a set of goals formed in the homes of their respective parents. From a joining of these goals there gradually emerges the identity of the new family. Shared identity does not erase differences; the joining is accomplished by complementing them. This process never ceases, but with each new adjustment comes a new quality of union.

With the arrival of the first child, husband and wife add to their previous identities the roles of father and mother, and the characteristics of family life are consequently modified.

For some time after birth, the infant is utterly dependent: he exists, in effect, in a state of almost total union with his mother. Gradually, he comes to recognize her as a separate being. He discovers his own face, mouth, fingers and toes. He discovers he is somebody, too. Then the father comes into the picture, the first stranger. He is not mother; he is different, yet in some way he is the same. The child accommodates to father as mother does; he begins now to adapt his emotions to the parental pair.

As he grows, new kinds of differences and new kinds of joining emerge between parents and child. One critical juncture comes when the baby is only one or two months old and mother withdraws his two-o'clock night feeding. The manner in which she does this affects the entire climate of family relations, now and afterward.

Two Approaches Let us compare two mothers. The first follows a rigid rule. After six weeks, no more night feeding. The baby cries and cries. It is agonizing, wretched crying. Mother cannot sleep, but she is stubborn. The rule must be obeyed. Eventually, the baby cries himself out; but he remains agitated and wakeful. Yes, he gives in, he must; but at what cost? Already there is a forced separation between mother and baby, a measure of distance and mistrust.

The second mother has a different approach. She cuddles the wailing baby in her arms. She

substitutes warmth and comfort for the two-o'clock feeding. She does this for several nights. It works.

The first mother is remote, authoritarian. The second is emotionally resilient, accommodates to change. She creates out of conflict a new quality of harmony.

And what does father do? Does he resent the noisy intrusion on his rest? Does he angrily demand that mother stifle the wailing? Or does he perhaps join her in trying to soothe the little one? If father helps her in an easy, warm way, mother can more readily do the same with their baby.

Multiply such occurrences a hundred times, in relation to habits of eating, sleeping, elimination, work and play, and it makes an extraordinary difference. In the first family, the child will become tense, fearful or overaggressive — ultimately authoritarian like his parents. In the second family, he is emotionally relaxed, free and healthy.

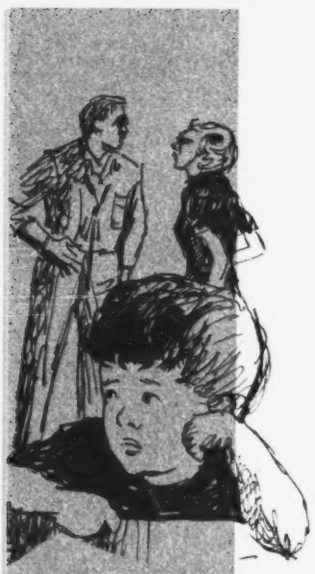
Now another baby arrives. Again the challenge of change. Will the firstborn welcome the newcomer or regard him as an intruder? The answer rests on the emotional health of the family group. If the older child has achieved an easy, trusting union with his parents, he will gradually accept the baby as an expression of confidence in them. To whatever extent he mistrusts his parents, he will resent the new baby and attack him. Prolonged hostility to the "little one" is a symptom of a disordered family.

To Each His Own In a happy home, the mother gives each child his own place, his own unique identity and belongingness. She shows respect for differences in age, sex, temperament, interests. The two-year-old need not tag after the six-year-old and spoil his play. Instead of scolding the older child – "You are older and should know better. You just have to put up with him" – she finds a way of casually diverting the baby to another activity.

A mother who tries to divide the cheese into exactly equal parts is disowning the real differences between her children. Basically, she is failing to accept and respect either one. She is encouraging a destructive competition between them. This is a sure-fire sign of maternal deficiency.

Suppose the six-year-old balks because he is not allowed to watch TV as late as the ten-year-old. He can be assured that he will have the same privilege when he is ten; but he must realize that he is younger and therefore requires an earlier bedtime. A sensitive mother can make this the happy time when she tells him a story. If he knows that some day he, too, will be ten, and right now it's pretty nice to be six, the conflict of privilege will not loom quite so large.

A way of family living that is relaxed and flexible can make room for the needs of children at any age. In a home atmosphere of this kind, the child develops readiness to change and builds up a sense of respect for his own identity that impels him, in turn, not only to respect but also to value individual differences among other persons.



When Parents Quarrel A child needs both parents. By nature, he is extraordinarily sensitive to relations between them. If they show warmth and affection for one another, he feels he is the creation of that love. If they are quarrelsome or alienated, his sense of worth and lovableness is instantly jeopardized. If they are deeply divided, he feels forced to side with one or the other. Thrown into conflict, he becomes bitter and vengeful toward both.

But the outcome need not be so dour. There is no family without parental conflicts — whether relating to work, money, friends or love life. A child can take these tensions in his stride, provided they are resolved. In fact, an expanding appreciation of the essential difference between a male and female parent, and parallel with this, their essential need of one another, is indispensable to the child's growth. Parents need not hide their normal differences.

But when failure to arrive at a reconciliation leads to a permanent emotional split, a division of the family into warring camps, or where father and mother engage in a conspiracy of silence to avoid futile wrangles, a child may absorb a feeling of nameless danger from these parental differences. He may experience a sense of menacing invasion which gives powerful impetus to the formation of destructive prejudices.

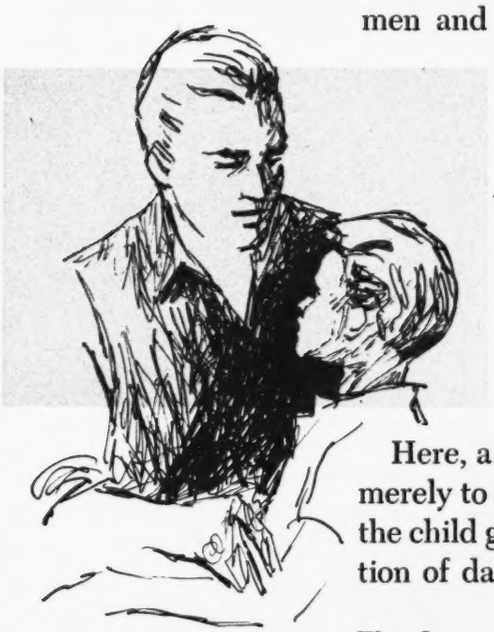
Sometimes tensions can be relieved by encouraging children to form attachments outside the family group. For example: A five-year-old girl with perfectionist parents develops a strong aversion to dirt. An aunt, who is an art teacher, invites her to join a children's

art group that meets each week in the aunt's home. Here the little girl plays happily with finger paints and models in clay. Her fetish against dirt disappears. She merges her image of mother with the softer, less exacting image of her aunt. She expands her activities and makes new friends.

Venturing Forth Moving out into the wider community, the child takes along not only a sense of self, but a sense of emotional identity with the family as well. In Janie's home, for example, there is much warmth and love. Father, mother and children form a tightly knit group, intimately bound with one another. Living in this close way, the family tends to overprotect the children. But Jane is now six and ready for kindergarten. At first she is shy and fearful, ill at ease with people who are different from her family. On the other hand, she is inwardly secure. She has learned to expect acceptance. Though timid among strangers, she is essentially open emotionally and willing to test the new world of kindergarten. No one hurts her. Soon she becomes absorbed in the adventure, gets a thrill out of new contacts and accomplishments. She makes friends. A healthy home has fortified her to meet reality.

Clinical study reveals that some children may see a dark skin as a symbol of violence and destruction. This is frequently nurtured in our culture by the use of certain expressions in the mass media and in ordinary conversa-

tion. In one family, where the young son begins to talk about "dirty niggers," it happens that the father works side by side with Negroes in the same automotive plant. When he hears his son talk in this offensive way, he does not scold the boy. Instead, at dinner, he tells about experiences in which one or another of his Negro co-workers inspired his admiration. He goes further. He brings several of the Negro workmen and their wives home for the evening.



The fact that there is a close bond between father and son serves as a bridge. The boy's reaction to the friendship between his father and these Negro fellow workmen is quite direct. Not only does he stop using offensive language; he feels free enough to talk to his father about his fear of violence and his reaction to dark skin.

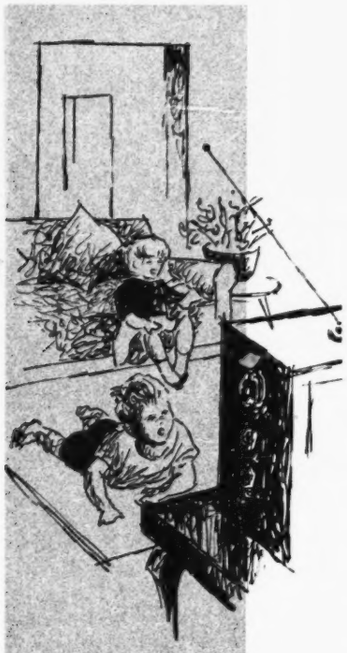
Here, a parent's conscious action serves not merely to correct offensive behavior, but helps the child gain insight into an irrational association of dark skin and violence.

The Community and the Family Today, more and more people from outside the family are involved in the child's early life—housekeepers and babysitters, nursery-school and Sunday-school teachers, play-group leaders. It is important for parents to establish true cooperation with these ancillary parents, to integrate what goes on at home with experiences in school, the play center and the religious group. Only if this is done can children gain a sense of continuity.

The family car has greatly extended the young child's geographic reach. His parents are his first travel guides and his models of social behavior. Their acceptance or rejection of unfamiliar people seen along the way; their approval or disapproval of differences in appearance and language; their flexibility or rigidity in new surroundings; their compassion or indifference at signs of poverty, inequality or misfortune – all these reactions, often tacit rather than outspoken, are quickly absorbed and soon become part of the soil in which the child's social attitudes are rooted.

Parents' own social lives set an even more important example. If the friends entertained at home are invariably of one group – ethnic, religious or racial – this fact will not be lost on young eyes. As times goes on, the child will naturally assume that companionable contacts with persons of other groups are disapproved. If, on the other hand, he sees that his parents accept group differences as normal and choose their friends simply on the basis of congeniality and common cultural, recreational or intellectual interests, his own outlook and capacity for social adjustment will be broadened.

Selecting books to bring home also calls for discretion. Children's very first impressions of the surrounding environment are tested against stories read aloud and picture-books shown to them, often before they are old enough to put their own thoughts into words. In choosing these first books wisely and with imagination, parents can help their children go forth into the world eager to welcome and enjoy human differences.

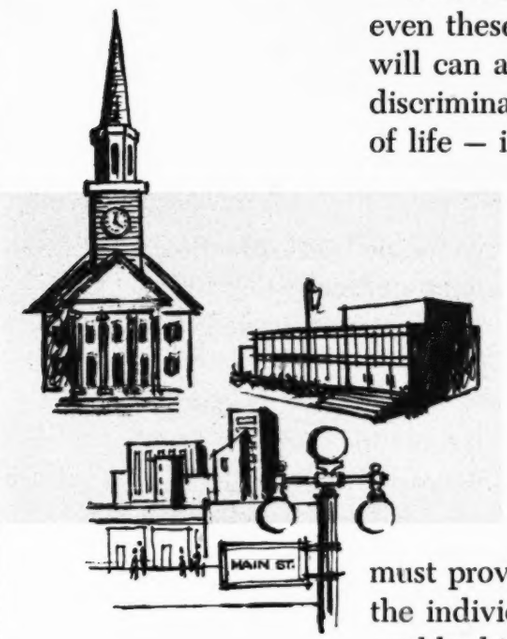


Television and radio are penetrating the modern home as never before. All too often, the pre-school audience receives entertainment fare that is emotionally indigestible — either frighteningly grim or sickeningly saccharine. Although broadcasters are showing a heartening desire to improve the quality of children's programs, much still remains to be done. The very young have no built-in resistance to violence, historical distortion, stereotyping of minority groups, and glossy, roseate portrayals of family life which bear little resemblance to reality.

The school probably exerts the most sustained influence outside the home. Parent-teacher associations should concern themselves with such matters as the textbooks used in the younger grades, the acceptance of differences among school personnel as well as among the student body, and the capacity of the teaching staff to create a democratic atmosphere in the classroom.

Youth-serving organizations — Scouts, "Y's," Boys' Clubs, Camp Fire Girls, community-center groups — share similar responsibility. The quality of the leadership in these settings —the membership policies laid down by boards of directors, the programs engaged in by the individual groups — all help establish patterns of social relationships and behavior.

The church-related agencies serving young children also need to examine their leadership and educational tools with an eye to ending discriminatory practices and removing teaching materials which perpetuate racial and religious bias.



Unless the citizenry as a whole keeps pace, even these forces of enlightenment and good will can accomplish little. The persistence of discrimination in the normal everyday routines of life – in housing, in jobs, in public places – implants in an observant growing child a feeling of confusion and mistrust, and ultimately a tendency toward corrosive cynicism.

Thus, the community must do more than simply furnish services to its children. It must do more than merely compensate for the weakening of family bonds that has come with social change. It must provide an environment which supports the individual in his search for integrity and enables him to master the tensions of the modern world.

In Short... What we have been saying may be summed up briefly in six points:

1. There is a deep connection between prejudice and mental illness.

2. Susceptibility to both of these afflictions depends largely on the quality of family life.

3. The family provides the matrix of shared experience in which the individual, child and adult alike, develops a sense of identity and "belongingness," achieves strength and health, and reaches out for the creative satisfactions of life. Where the family fails in its essential functions, it becomes the root source of prejudice and mental illness.

4. People who achieve sound mental health may have a wide range of likes and dislikes,

but they have no need to nourish attitudes of prejudice. Some individuals who are emotionally unhealthy stave off mental breakdown through the use of prejudice. To save themselves from cracking up they try to destroy someone else.

5. But prejudice is a feeble barricade. Since the effort to hold oneself together by degrading another person is irrational, it ultimately collapses like a house of cards.

6. Through its very irrationality, prejudice becomes a destructive force in society. It fortifies a master-slave pattern of human relations, as if the victim existed only to aggrandize the attacker – a pattern in which power is exalted for its own sake.

The challenge is not merely to control the destructive consequences of prejudice and mental illness but – more important – to prevent these afflictions from taking hold. To move effectively toward this goal, we must learn to understand the contagious effects of emotion in family relations. We must find ways to promote sound values in shaping patterns of human relations within the family and the community.

The anxieties of the nuclear age excite new fears and afford new temptations for the misuse of power and exploitation of prejudice. But this modern era offers also an expanding horizon of knowledge about the nature of man himself. By raising our sights, by absorbing this knowledge, we can cope with the hazards and move ahead for the common good.

Suggestions for further reading may be found in Prejudice and the Child, *an annotated bibliography available at 10¢ per copy from:*

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
INSTITUTE OF HUMAN RELATIONS
165 East 56 Street, New York 22, N. Y.

Single copy, 50¢.
Quantity prices on request.